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## **From Wife to Widow Entrepreneur in French Family Businesses An Invisible-Visible Role in Passing on the Business to the Next Generation**

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**An Invisible-Visible Role in Passing on the Business to the Next Generation**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we highlight the role played by widows in French Family businesses. We take a historical point of view in order to highlight the significance of our topic. We show the role of French family law in enabling widows to become entrepreneurs. Then we relate the life of the wife of a company owner, in a French family business created at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We show why and how a spouse becomes an entrepreneur when her husband dies. We demonstrate what key roles she plays in maintaining the business within the realm of the family.

*Keywords:* invisibility, visibility, widow entrepreneur, wife, family business

### **Résumé**

Dans cet article nous mettons en avant le rôle joué par les veuves dans les entreprises familiales françaises. Nous adoptons un point de vue historique de manière à montrer le caractère significatif de notre sujet. Nous montrons quel rôle le droit de la famille français a joué pour faciliter l'accès des veuves au statut de veuves-entrepreneurs. Nous restituons ensuite le parcours de la femme d'un dirigeant d'entreprise familiale française, créée au début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. Nous montrons pourquoi et comment une épouse devient entrepreneur à la mort de son mari. Nous démontrons le rôle qu'elle joue pour maintenir l'entreprise au sein de la famille.

*Mots clefs :* invisibilité, visibilité, veuve entrepreneur, épouse, entreprise familiale

## Introduction

In this article we show the significant role played by widows in French Family businesses and explore their transition from an invisible status to a visible one at troubled times for the family business. We show why and how a spouse becomes a widow entrepreneur when her husband dies.

If one takes a close look at French family businesses, such as Duchéneaut and Orhan (2000 p. 59) and Fouquet (2005 p. 34) have done, one notices, especially with small and medium sized ones, that, in the huge majority of cases the owner and manager is the husband. Men will play a leading role. They will be pictured as entrepreneurs, while their wives will at best have invisible supporting roles. However, be they visible or invisible, they are voluntarily or involuntarily present, linked to the business. They can even be involved in its history, its evolution ... or its disappearance. This finding challenges existing academic work on family businesses. Although there are notable exceptions (Gresle 1981, Zarca 1990, Richomme 2000, Poza & Messer, 2001, Curimbaba 2002, Schepens 2004, Daumas 2006, Malarewicz 2006), most of the existing research on family business pays scant attention to the wives of business owners. This was mentioned already by Allouche and Aman (2000) who wrote that between 1936 and 2000 1,45% of articles related to family business concern the role of women.

Despite a positive evolution, this stays true even today, based on the review conducted by Jimenez (2009) on research in women in family firms. The authors who conducted research on our subject of interest proposed a typology of different roles for the spouse (Poza and Messer, 2001) or heiresses (Curimbaba, 2002) in a family business. They defined the notions of visibility and invisibility, based on whether a woman has a formal or non-formal role in the organization. They show that a discrepancy between her work as informal advisor, mediator, and family manager and the fact that she does not appears in the company's

organizational chart explains the invisible status. They proposed explanations based on gender and structure of opportunities as to why this discrepancy exists.

However, as suggested by Jimenez (2009) in her directions for future research there is much left to explore on the question of invisibility and she proposes a list of questions. With a focus on the case of widow entrepreneurs in French family businesses, we propose, in this article, an insight into the following questions listed by Jimenez:

- What happens to the invisible women as their husbands die?
- What factors influence the widow to decide to take over the business?
- How do firms taken over by widows evolve? What factors condition or influence this contribution?

Prior to moving on with the rest of this introduction we would like to specify what we mean by family business, gender based approach and entrepreneur.

Based on Allouche and Amann (2000), we will consider that a business is a family one when the family owns enough stock to be able to control strategic decisions, to choose its managers, to decide how it will be transmitted and to impose its values on to the business.

Let us also mention that our conception of gender is based on Scott (1986). It implies a differentiation of the roles of men and women, based on a power relationship. Based on this conception, we want to understand the relationship and the balance of power between husband and wife in the context of a family business.

As for the notion of entrepreneur, according to Duchéneaut and Orhan (2000 p. 52) « the entrepreneur is a person who, placed at the head of a company, is responsible for its direct management and for the associated financial risks ». By this we mean that the entrepreneur is somebody with an entrepreneurship spirit but also somebody who takes a personal and financial risk, as he has ownership, in part or totally, of the company's stock.

In a first part of this paper we briefly retrace the evolution of French family law and the role it played in giving widows a key role.

In a second part, we re-read the existing work of historians on widow entrepreneurs, from early industrial times up to 1975<sup>1</sup> so as to better picture and analyze the significance of such a phenomenon over a long period of history. The transition from invisibility to visibility is present at all times.

Then in a third part of this paper, in order to better understand this transition from invisibility to visibility we relate the life of the wife of a company owner and manager in a French family business. This business was created at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on an on-going ethnographic study, we present it as a monograph, in a micro-historical perspective, with the aim of going beyond a simple inventory.

On another level, exploring this question will also enable women to become more visible, knowing that they are often overshadowed by their husbands-managers. In a certain way, it is a contribution to writing the history of women, in resonance with the work of Thébaud (1998). We are aware that this is a challenge as women are almost absent from history, *a fortiori* from the history of companies. They are not recognized for their daily role in these companies. Women have written little about themselves and it is usually men who speak for them.

## **A Short History of French Family Law**

### **Before the French Revolution**

Before the French Revolution the assertion of the superiority of the husband over his wife is a constant one. Law is a reflection of a saying dating back to these old times that « A wife's power is through her husband » (Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, 2001 p.182). By law, women are considered as minors. As a counterpart they benefit from legal protections, be it through

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<sup>1</sup> The year 1975 is not the result of a choice. Simply; none of the historical research that we identified goes beyond this year.

the common ownership of property or through the dowry system. The husband is obliged to look after the interests and the property of his wife. In theory, subordination is associated with protection.

This duty to protect is rooted in the idea, widespread at a time ranging from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, that by nature, women are weak both in flesh and in spirit. The representation of the woman as weak means that « the protection afforded to the wife is extended to the widow, with the difference that, because of the devolution to her of the powers that her husband detained, she changes status, from legally subordinated to fully able to act » (Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, 2001 p. 194). From what is she being protected against by getting so many rights? She is being protected from creditors, but also from heirs. Indeed, based on the principle of lineage, the husband's property must stay in the family, meaning with heirs. Based in this principle, the wife, not being an heir, is at risk of ending up resourceless.

However, if widowhood is synonymous with freedom, it can only be exerted in an honorable context. Widows are feared, as shown by Beauvalet-Boutouyrie (2001, p.27) in their study of widows prior to the revolution, reminding us that Fénelon<sup>2</sup> (1687) in his « Treatise on the education of young girls »<sup>1</sup>, of a rather liberal tone « fears those who take a passion for business, at the risk of blindly surrendering to some “advisors who are enemies of peace” ». The widow entrepreneur is being reproached her love for money as a substitute to the love for her husband. She is being suspected of wanting to keep for herself the property of her children, but at the same time she enjoys a strong legal status.

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<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>Fénelon, F. (1687). *Traité de l'éducation des filles*, Paris.



### **Marriage Under the French Revolution.**

Before the French revolution, marriage took place under the benevolent authority of the clergy, who was sole holder of civil registers. The revolution desacralized marriage. In 1792 the Legislative Assembly recognized marriage as a civil contract only, and civil registers were handed over to town authorities in a decree dated from September 12, 1792.

On August 21, 1793, the national convention defined marriage as « a convention by which man and woman commit, under the authority of the law, to live together, to feed and bring up the children whom may be born from their union ». The rules of marriage are made more flexible. Obstacles are fewer, and religious periods such as Lent or Advent, during which marriage was forbidden, disappear. As with any contract, marriage can be broken.

The secularization of marriage and of civil registries, by the law of September 20, 1792 is certainly one of the important legacies of the French revolution to family law.

One could have been led to think the Revolution would have given wives more freedom, especially as marriage was not the responsibility of religious authorities anymore. No such thing happened. The French revolution did not change property relationships between spouses, and did not change the incapacity status of married women. It simply transferred in a secular context the Epistle to the Ephesians (5, 22-24) which the priest would read at a wedding mass under the old regime (Gaudemet, 1987). The revolution kept intact the pre-existing laws which governed the relationship between spouses. Equality between men did not extend to married women.

### **From the Code Napoléon of 1804 to Today's Family Law**

The 1804 civil code confined married women while prolonging the secular marriage institution with terms which are very close to those of the 1792 law. The wife cannot make any legal or financial transactions without the authorization of her husband. Bonaparte was to

declare that « a woman is the property of her husband, much as the fruit tree is the property of the gardener ».

The civil code is doubtlessly an event. Its influence throughout Europe testifies to that. However it did not provide married women with legal capacity. While in terms of inheritance the daughter is considered as equal to her brother, by virtue of the disappearance of primogeniture, the wife is still legally subordinated to her husband.

Family law during the 19th century reinforced the role of the mother, of the wife-mother. « Only marriage gave women a status in society, but only widowhood would give them back the freedom they had alienated under the hands of their husband, and gave them at the same time the right to be entrusted with a major part of the common property » (Daumard 1996, p. 365). All along the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and up until 1938, French family law will consider women as subordinated to their husbands and it is only if they became widows that they gained legal freedom.

To sum up the evolution of family law since the French Revolution we have outlined important dates which are presented in table 1.

Insert table 1 about here

This summary of French family law, although brief, shows that up until 1938, married women were, most of the time, dependent from their husband and that it is not until 1965 that they were given the right to have a professional activity without their husband's consent, although at the same time, widows were not subjected to this law. They had the same legal rights as men. In line with this idea, we must emphasize that it is not before 1982 that the wives of craftsmen or traders were obliged, by law, to choose an official status, or in other words had to become « visible » (Forgit 1996).

With French family law into mind, and with the idea that it has always given widows more legal power than married women, let us now explore the importance of widow-entrepreneurs in family businesses.

### **The Importance of Widow Entrepreneurs in the History of French Family Business**

In this part we will show the role played by widow-entrepreneurs in the history of family businesses. To start with, we will set the context and briefly summarize the history of family businesses. We will then place widow-entrepreneurs within this context so as to make their role salient in the longevity of these businesses. We will thus attempt to show how and why a business owner's wife can move from invisibility to visibility. Widowhood will project her from an invisible and unknown role to the head of the family business and French family law will provide her with a legal status which makes this possible.

### **A Brief History of Family Businesses**

As shown by Allouche and Amann (2000), Kenyon-Rouvinez and Ward (2004) research conducted on family business was sparse up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, what exists gives us an insight into the history of family businesses and casts a light onto their importance.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the pre-industrial age (Verley, 1994) there are no corporations such as the ones that will emerge during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. 18<sup>th</sup> century businesses still lack the four interdependent elements which define the “modern” corporation: production management, labour management, commercial management and financial management. However there are already businesses which will take part in the emergence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century corporation. Progressively, merchants will become merchant manufacturers, craftsmen will structure their activity in an industrial manner, and shopkeepers will become traders. During these times there was almost always confusion between the entrepreneur and

the business, especially as these businesses did not exist as legal entities separately from their owners, which means that family and business were closely linked.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century, which gave rise to the « modern corporation », represents continuity and not a break from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As Verley (p. 72) points out « for 18th century people, the business was above all the owner, and even the owner's family, which gave a longevity of many generations ». One can say there are family businesses, especially for small shopkeepers and craftsmen, even if they are not legal entities. Elaborate family/property strategies are put into place to keep and develop the business. This will give rise to dynasties, some of which still exist.

This brief history of family businesses highlights their permanence in time and shows us, as a background, the role and the strength of family networks, marriages and transmissions. As mentioned earlier only a small amount of research has been devoted to the invisible, yet crucial, contribution to longevity, of the wives of these entrepreneurs and/or heirs in family businesses. Let us now attempt to observe the role of these wives should they be set in the specific situation of their husbands dying and of them having to take on the responsibility for running the business.

### **Widow Entrepreneurs in the History of Family Businesses**

Based on secondary sources dating back to the beginning of the modern era up until 1975, which are the work of historians, law specialists and management academics, on women, small businesses owners, traders and industrial figures, we have selected what concerns the subject of widow entrepreneurs in the history of family businesses.

Before the French revolution, wives were not given access to professions, or only rarely. With the death of their husband this changes. As provided for by family law, this access is open. Beauvalet-Boutouyrie (2001, p. 276) tells us that « Not all widows take over the business, but they have the possibility to do so and some do not hesitate to seize this

opportunity ». The experience they have gained as assistant to their husband, beyond their domestic role, enables them to carry on and even to develop their defunct husband's business. Even though there were a number of conditions for this to happen – knowledge of the trade, presence of workers able to carry on with the job, no remarriage – it was observed that widows were in capacity to become widow-entrepreneurs in many different trades and crafts.

Throughout the 17th century, the trade of Saint Malo is of relevant interest due to the presence of widows as company-heads consecutively to the death their husbands who were traders. Based on a capitulation roll dating back to 1701 and on other sources, Lespagnol (1997) numbers at least ten out of 140 trading houses. In this trade, widowhood is a real opportunity for a woman wishing to become an entrepreneur. The vast majority of Saint Malo trading houses were personal businesses and not corporations. Lespagnol (1997, p. 120) reminds us that « the enterprise is the entrepreneur ». Due to the fact that there are no partners, there is a complete fusion between the trading house's property and the wealth of the trader. Due to this fact as well, should the trader die, and if the family council acting in the interest of children gave his agreement, his widow would become head of the trading house. Most the time, this was an opportunity to turn the trading house into a trading corporation so as to associate sons should the occasion arise. The wife, now a widow, would turn into a widow-entrepreneur so as to ensure the longevity of the family business. The business culture and knowledge she had acquired would enable her to become the real head of the business, to go beyond a role of care-taker and to develop the business in such terms that it would become a player of choice in the Saint Malo trade. « Some of them such as Guillemette Jocet widow Moreau, Marguerite Boscher widow Trouin, Guyonne Le Pays widow Vincent, Françoise Cheville widow Nouail, Françoise Patard widow Du Bourg Onfroy, Marie Loret widow Gautier, fully stand amongst the most prominent figures of the Saint Malo trade at the time of Louis XIV » (Lespagnol 1997 p.124).

The role of widow entrepreneurs in Saint Malo will decline little by little with the rise of trade corporations, to the detriment of trade houses. In the 1788 Gournay Almanach there are almost no widow entrepreneurs to be found. The 18<sup>th</sup> century marks a break with the 17th century as far as the Saint Malo society is concerned. It emphasizes the role of the domestic housewife, in the reception room rather than behind a counter. Personal businesses make way for trading corporations and make the widows of traders less needed to safeguard their longevity.

Along the lines of the Saint Malo trade, the shipping industry in Nantes is also notable for the prominence of widow-entrepreneurs and their role in the sustainability and the growth of family businesses, as shown by Meyer (1999, p.187). A capitulation table, dating back to 1788/1789 shows five widows among the fourteen major trading families in Nantes: the Grou, Bertrand, Chaurand, Portier de Lantimo and Clanchy widows. « Thus the widow will partner with their children and often with her son in law, the father will partner with his sons, brothers will partner with each other and sometimes with their sisters » (Meyer, 1999, p.105).

The work of Carlin (1965) on « La Maison Colombo », a small retail trading business, during the Revolution, a pivotal time between the 17th and 18th century, also testifies to the role of widow entrepreneurs in the trade of Nice. The history of this family business called « La Maison Colombo », in Nice, described by Carlin from its books of accounts and from books of copies of letters; tells us why this woman takes over the cloth and canvas trading activity of her husband upon his death. It is mainly to provide for her three children. Thus the tenuous link between the domestic sphere and the trading one is emphasized. Furthermore, the widow's managerial decisions are clearly visible such as keeping an eye on the competition, lectures on logistics – such as the choice of a flag so as to reduce the risks incurred by privateers, rebate and cash management policies. One also notices how the business is

embedded within the networks with which it does business, such as with the Jewish community.

In the eighteenth century, the book trade is also particularly representative of the importance of widow-entrepreneurs in the lives of family businesses. In Paris, in the eighteenth century, of the eight booksellers installed “place de la Sorbonne”, three are widows and they represent not less than 20% of all booksellers in Paris. This proportion is about 10% in provincial towns (Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, 2001, p. 277).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century many widows were running shipping and trading companies in Rouen and le Havre, as shown by the work of Dardel<sup>32</sup> (quoted by Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, 2001, p.280) and more recently by the one of Delobette (2002). In the textile industry, widows played a significant role, as mentioned by Chassagne (1981). The steel industry also provides fine examples of widow-entrepreneurs with, specifically, the illustrious Marguerite D’Hausen, widow of Charles Wendel (1708-1784), known as « Madame d’Hayange », who is a forge master (Jeanneney, 1976 and Woronoff, 1984). Along the same lines Marseille (2004) speaks of « iron widows » in order to highlight the major role played by widow entrepreneurs in keeping the industrial group within the realm of the family and their desire to maintain the family in a cohesive focus on the family business.

In his book on family businesses, Malarewicz (2006) incorporates the earlier work on Wendel to highlight the importance of widows in the sustainability of large industrial enterprises. Thus he tells us that « one of the characteristics of this lineage of entrepreneurs is that, here, three women – when they became widows – took the succession of their husbands and displayed to the same extent as their husbands, their management skills and their ability to rule in a way that seemed to be the preserve of men. It should be noted, however, that after

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<sup>2</sup> Dardel, P., (1963) *Navires et marchandises dans les ports de Rouen et du Havre au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p.525-528. Paris : Sevpen.

the 1789 Revolution, many women had to ensure the continuity of their businesses. From this point of view, the Wendel family is not a one-off example » Malarewicz (2006, p.29).

In the 19th century and up to the Second World War, the same phenomenon can be observed, especially with petty bourgeois Parisians and small business owners in the North. Based on the bankruptcy files of Paris between 1815 and 1848, Daumard (1996) also highlights the role of business head played by the widows of traders-shopkeepers, who represented the petty bourgeoisie of that time. By contrast, in upper bourgeoisie circles, the widow is less directly involved in the affairs of the family business. Rather, she invests her time as family-head, makes sure that family wealth increases and rules the clan. In her study of small business owners in the North of France, from 1920 to 1975, Gresle (1981) points out that more than 45% of widows pursue the activity of their husband.

This review of existing work on widow-entrepreneurs in family businesses, although incomplete, shows three elements related to their role in the business. The first one is that widow-entrepreneurs have played a decisive role in the transmission of the business to the next generation, in a constant way, over the centuries, be they the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The second one is that widowhood, for legal reasons, enables the wife of the entrepreneur to come out of the shadow, from an invisible position, into the light, into a visible one. Under the old regime, before the French revolution, up until 182, marriage forced women into a supporting role in running the family business. Only when they became widows did they have an opportunity to come back to the front stage. Widowhood is, in a certain way, an opportunity to seize for women who wish to become entrepreneurs, at least by comparison with married women who remained subordinated to their husband-entrepreneur. The third one is that, based on the work reviewed, the need to provide for their children and to pass the business on to them, when they come of age, are key motivations for widows to accept to take on responsibility.



However, except for the work of Carlin (1965), all these elements do not provide us with enough information on managerial and entrepreneurial acts, no more than on the skills needed for the wife to manage this transition from an invisible situation to a very visible one. At this point we encounter the difficulty of writing the story of these women, the wives of entrepreneurs who became widow-entrepreneurs. There is a need to dwell on the study of the wife who becomes a widow-entrepreneur as a vector of continuity for the family business, so as to better understand her role. It is with this purpose in mind that we propose to complement the existing literature by a monograph on a 20<sup>th</sup> century widow entrepreneur whom we will call widow L.G.

### **The Life Path of a Young Girl Who Successively Turned Into a Wife, a Widow and a Widow Entrepreneur**

So as to grasp our monograph of a widow-entrepreneur, a presentation of our research methodology is needed.

#### **An Approach Through a Monograph**

In this part we will highlight the way our research question on the role of widow entrepreneurs in family businesses emerged. We will then specify what methodology we used to build our monograph.

**Research path and the emergence of a research question.** To start with, our initial research question was to understand how, in France, a family business can manage to maintain itself, and even to grow, in an industry which has heavily been impacted by globalization for the last fifteen years, such as the clothing-apparel industry. Through press cuttings we had a superficial knowledge of the L.R. company; namely that it had been set up in 1919, by a family with a strong commitment to catholic values, which completely controlled it, and that it specialized in the confection of nightwear for women, that it had 110 employees and it was located in the Choletais region, identified as a very dynamic industrial

district in the 1960-1970's and qualified by some (Courault, 2005) as a network. All these elements made us want to better know it and understand its longevity. It seemed interesting to study this company in relation to the embeddedness theory developed by Granovetter and McGuire (1998), according to which the efficiency of strategic decisions in a company, and as a consequence its longevity, can be explained by the quality of the social networks that it activates. We considered that it was the case of this company which had 89 years of existence and whose managers belonged to the third generation.

Along with Allouche and Amann (2001), and Allouche and Saboly (2001), as a prolongation of the work of Granovetter and McGuire (1998), we think that the success of family businesses is explained by the interaction between three networks: the family network, the founders/managers network and the network of partners. An in-depth study of this company should have revealed the importance of the combination of these three networks to provide an overall explanation of family business longevity.

In 2003, through a happy combination of circumstances, when transmission to the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation was in progress, we met one of the sons of the founder, a retired manager from the company. A bond of trust was soon established which enabled us to be presented to the acting general manager and, consecutively, to many members of the family and of the company. We were thus in good position to study this family business.

We first started to try and understand its present situation, its strategic orientations, its mode of management and the topic of its transmission to the present management team. We were naturally led to analyze it in a historical perspective. We accumulated, up to this day, an important quantity of data which is partially exploited. So as to explain its longevity, two elements came out. The first one was the role of the family. The link between the family and the business is very strong. If we follow Allouche and Saboly's idea (2001), the main social networks which are activated belong to the family and to the founders/rulers. Even though we

also perceived the presence of the Choletais district network, its effect was weaker. The second one was the role of the founder's wife, when she worked alongside her husband, and also when, upon his death, she became head of the company. From one day to the next, she came out of the shadow into the light, from an invisible status to a visible one as a widow entrepreneur, for a period which lasted 16 years. This way, our research question changed from understanding how a company can survive and grow in a sector of activity, heavily impacted by globalization, to understanding the role of this widow entrepreneur in the family business, then to enquiring about the significance of this phenomenon in France. This research question emerged from our field work. We then laid out three questions, suggested by Jimenez (2009), listed in the introduction to which, we felt, our study could contribute.

**Methodology.** Our study is based on many sources. Archives from the L. family, enabling to recoup the history of the company and the history of its founder with the one of his wife turned into a widow entrepreneur. These documents which we qualify as a « book of reason » of the L. family are a fundamental source to us even though they have limitations (Tricard, 2002) when one tries to step into the history of the wife, the L.G. widow-entrepreneur. We also met the current 3<sup>rd</sup> generation managers who spoke to us about the L company today and about its history, the two successive 2<sup>nd</sup> generation managers and three second generation managers. All five, sons or sons in law of widow L.G.. We also met the wives of two of her sons, daughters in law of widow L.G. who knew her well.

The people we interviewed are all in relation with one another, which we feel, enables us to describe our work as an ethnographic study, or fieldwork (Maget 1953) rather than as a series of qualitative interviews. This choice of method and of presentation enables us to provide a better picture of the subject investigated, which for us is the invisible wife, turned visible through widowhood. By nature ethnographic studies take time and request patience from the researcher before he can draw knowledge from them. This does not exclude

intermediate descriptions-interpretations. This is the status of the present work. Our fieldwork is far from being completed but is sufficiently advanced for the purpose of this article.

### **The History of the L.G. Widow Through the History of the L. Company**

**A third generation family business (1919- ).** The L. Company which Marie L.G. ran as a widow is still in existence today. It was originally set up in 1919 and was then specialized in corsetry and orthopedics. In the early 70's the company moved to the production of feminine nightwear under the brand R., sold exclusively in shops and department stores. Today the business is in the hands of the third generation and is ran by P. grand-son in law of the founder F. His brothers in law are his partners. The company's sales represent 6,2 million Euros, out of which 17% corresponds to exports.

The annual production of 200 000 units of nightwear takes place in one and only one plant, not far from the town of Nantes, in France, where 110 people work.

**From young girl to married woman.** Marie G. was born in 1904, from Auguste G, wine merchant, and from Marie B., his wife. Two sisters and a brother will come after her. Her father died abruptly on August 31, 1921. Her mother, now a widow, found herself in a situation of great financial difficulty and sold the family business. In order to survive she occasionally did sewing jobs and rented rooms. At 8, Marie G. lost her father and her life changed radically from an affluent one to one with hardships.

Marie G., who was very pious, like the rest of the family, also regularly attended school and obtained her end of primary school certificate in 1916. One year later, she rented herself as a shepherd in a farm to help her mother feed the family. From 1916 to 1921, she went from "place to place" to rent herself as a laborer or a maid.

During the year 1921, Mr. And Mrs L., who were looking for somebody to employ, landed one Sunday in front of the Church square, in Marie G.'s birth village, where they were totally unknown. M. L. was a reputed herbalist in Nantes and St Nazaire. They came to meet

and eventually recruit Marie G. A deal was concluded. She left for Cholet where she started a new life which was disrupted by the brutal death of Madame L.

From 1921 to 1927, Marie worked in the L. company in the St Nazaire and Cholet shops. In 1925, Madame L. died after having given birth to 3 children (2 sons and one daughter)/ Mr L. ended up being a widow. He decided to remarry quickly. He needed a “mother” for his children and he chose Marie G.

On August 1, 1927, Marie G. married her boss, Emmanuel L. She was « chosen » for her moral qualities but also because she knew the children well and had experience in the retail stores. Eleven children will come out of this marriage (7 daughter and 4 sons). For Emmanuel L., this is a total of 14 children.

**The husband entrepreneur is ... the business.** Emmanuel L. was born on August 5, 1893, next to Redon. He was the last child in a family which counted eleven children. Born in a very pious family, he became himself very pious and remained that way until his death. All his life he also had royalist convictions which had an influence on conception and exercise of power. He married in 1916. After a brief experience as a teacher in 1919, he decided to go into business. With the help of his family in law, in order to achieve his objectives and improve his earnings, he bought the business of a herbalist in a town located in the region of Vendée. He chose to specialize in the manufacture of trusses and of various belts.

The activity « orthopedic corsets, rectifiers and medical devices » was inscribed on the shop window. Emmanuel L. initially became a manufacturer and gave up retailing, which he regretted. In 1925, he also settled in Saint Nazaire, where he was active in both manufacturing and trading activities. His business grew in these two towns. Along with the growth of manufacturing, the wholesale and retail activity also expanded. Retail shops were opened in Nantes and in Rennes. These shops, the management of which was delegated to a sister, then to children, still exist.

Emmanuel L. was a creative man, with many ideas. Two of them seem to have structured his line of conduct:

- Cater as much as possible to the needs of orthopedists and pharmacists, which were his customers.
- Integrate manufacturing activities as much as possible, as close as possible to the raw materials. This meant the company developed a wide span of skills: a sewing workshop for the confectionery of corsets and trusses, weaving of the fabrics needed for this activity, some knitting of fabrics for belts and ant-varicose stockings, woodwork, leatherwork, steel work for major orthopedic work as well as the equipment needed for electrolytic nickel and cadmium plating.

The business stayed in Saint Nazaire up until 1941, when the bombings forced it to settle in Clisson. Part of the know-how was lost. After the war medical practice evolved and the company struggled to adapt itself. The percentage of trading in sales increased, to the detriment of manufacturing activities. The company started selling bras and girdles. Marie L.G. had a commercial streak and encouraged this development while her husband, who ran the business, was exhausted. Manufacturing started losing money. Stores took over. He died in 1956.

**From wife to widow-entrepreneur.** Marie L.G., married woman, became a widow. She ended up being alone with seven children to look after and a manufacturing and retail business with stores. Upon the death of her husband, all the children who had reached the legal age were either working or had worked in the company.

After the death of Emmanuel L. who had managed his business in a masterly way until his death, ruling both his family and his business, his widow immediately took over the management of the company and kept it until 1972.

It seems that preserving family unity was a strong motive in her decision to take on the role of CEO. Upon the death of her husband, Marie L.G. laid founding acts. For example, the day of the funeral, in front of the tomb of her husband, before it was closed, she made her children swear « to get on well with each other ». She feared for the future, foresaw a conflict which had already started between two brothers J. and B. B., the younger one, who had been promoted by his father to the detriment of J., the elder son. The second founding act was to tell B., promoted by his father, as he came back from Algeria, after serving in the French army during this country's independence war, that « nobody had kept the seat for him ». She then reinstated her elder son, J., in the senior position that was his. Through these acts she managed to keep the family together and strayed away from her husband's wishes, not acting as a simple caretaker.

As soon as she assumed leadership of the company management, she worked with her sons on reviving the business. In 1959, she turned to a consulting company specialized in organization to initiate change, but it got bogged down in family affairs. She wanted to control the stores and thus set up a centralized purchasing department. The skirt and bra business grew. A new brand, which still exists today, was set up in 1964 so as to promote these products. In 1966, ten years after the beginning of her regency, a new line of products was launched: "nightwear". Today, 40 years after it was launched, it makes up the company's activity. In 1971, the medical part of the activity died a quiet death. A year later, widow L.G. handed over the reins of the business, even though until 1995, she kept a watchful eye on the business, on her children and grand children.

## **Discussion**

The saga of this woman provides us with an opportunity to see how the wife of an entrepreneur turned from an invisible role to a visible one, chiefly it seems to prevent conflict within the family and enable a peaceful transition to the next generation. In doing so, we see

that she did not act as a simple caretaker but combined her previous invisible role of maintaining family unity with her new role as CEO to reorient the company and ensure both its longevity and the longevity of the family commitment in the business. Here we discuss a number of findings related to this study.

**The silence on wives and widow entrepreneurs.** It seems that archives are « prolific » on daughters and mothers but are rather « silent » on the wife and the widow entrepreneur. For example, the will of E.L. makes no reference to his wife. His archives provide very little information on the role of his widow. The diary of J., one of the sons, reminds us of what she was as a child but says almost nothing on her role upon the death of her husband: she is portrayed as a beloved mother and not as a chief executive officer. It is mainly through interviews and not through documents that we managed to retrace her history as chief executive officer.

**Management skills learnt while in the shadow of her husband.** The story of widow L.G. confirms the idea developed in many life stories, such as the one of “The Memoirs of Glückel Hameln<sup>4</sup>” a 17th century widow entrepreneur presented by Zemon-Davis (2002) and the one of the Colombo widow by Carlin (1965). If the wives of entrepreneurs stay confined in the shadow of their husbands, they nonetheless learn skills which provide them with legitimacy when it comes to assuming leadership upon the death of their husbands. The widow entrepreneur earns a living for her family and provides jobs to her children. She does not remarry and thus preserves her status.

**The inextricable link between the family and business sphere. *Destined to stay a withdrawn wife.*** The close connection between professional and private life, well known as *affectio familia/’affectio societatis* was well described by Carlin (1965) in the Colombo house, and highlighted by Scott (2002) and Méda (2002). It shows up clearly in our case.

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<sup>4</sup> Hameln G. (1690-1691), *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*, Translated with notes by Marvin Lowenthal, with a new Introduction by Robert Rosen, Schocken Books, New York, 1989, 295p.



How does it work? It casts a shadow on the role of the wife. Should we paraphrase Malarewicz (2006, p.54), we would say that the wife L.G. provides the business with a daily and benevolent help that she is supposed to provide to her husband Emmanuel L., while leaving him to be on the front stage. In this way she belongs to the crowd of spouses who act as “assistants” to their husbands-entrepreneurs-craftsmen described and analysed by Zarca (1990) and Richomme (2000) as well as by Poza and Messer (2001), Curimbaba (2002). Widow L.G. managed to become an entrepreneur thanks to, or because of the death of her husband. Without this status she would have remained the wife of the business owner and the mother of his children. Thus, being a widow, for women, can promote entrepreneurship. This social disruption can be of source of liberation (Lalivie d’Epinay, 1985).

***Conflicts or agreements within the couple have an impact on the family business.***

Mother L.G. assumed the leadership of the company upon the death of her husband after he had run it in a masterly way until the day of his death, ruling over both family and business. He had “elected” his second son to succeed him, thus ousting the elder son, the « darling » of his mother. However, upon his death, his mother took the reins of the business and evicted her second son, and *de facto* rehabilitated the elder one. In this way, the L.G. widow displayed her will not to follow her husband’s wishes and deliberately strayed away from them. One the youngest sons, P., analysed this decision as a continuation of the conflict within the couple, as much as an attempt to preserve family unity from a conflict which had already started before the husband’s death. According to Malarewicz (2006), this occurs frequently in family businesses.

***The spirit of Regency.*** What is particularly interesting here is that what should have been temporary lasted 16 years. She exerted power both within family and business circles. She ruled over all her children, helped by the oath never to fight with each other, that she made them pronounce over the unclosed grave of their father, her husband.

## **Conclusion**

Let us now come back to the questions we outlined in the introduction and draw on our work to provide some answers and suggestions for future research.

### **What Happens to the Invisible Women as their Husbands Die?**

Based on our review of literature, a significant number of invisible women, spouses of family business owners become widow entrepreneurs. This has been observed in France, by historians, over the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A historical appraisal in other countries would help determine the extent to which this finding can be generalized to other geographical areas. Our monograph is a detailed illustration of what happened to one these widows.

### **What Factors Influence the Widow to Decide to Take Over the Business?**

A first factor we identified and which immediately comes to mind is the influence of French family law. It has consistently given widows, and not married women, full legal status. Thus it has enabled widows to play a prominent role in family businesses since at least the pre-industrial age. Once again, a comparison with other countries would be interesting to identify to what extent these findings can be generalized.

A second factor, based on the historical review, is the social class the family belongs to. Upper *bourgeoisie* families, probably because of higher and more diversified sources of income, and probably because they did not give wives a chance to take part in the business, give widows less chances to take over the family business. Small *bourgeoisie* families, probably because of a combination of economic reasons and previous involvement in the business, provide widows with many more opportunities.

A third factor we identified was the need of the widow to provide for her children and the family business as a desirable outlet to pursue this venture. This appears especially in our historical overview.

A fourth factor which can be guessed from the historical overview and which appears clearly in the case study is to prevent sibling rivalry. By taking over as CEO, the widow quells the fight for the top position and buys time to organize a smooth transmission to the next generation. What may initially be seen as a decision to temporarily take over can last much longer than the initial intended regency. This is probably because rivalries take at least one generation to die. We think that the intensity of family rivalries and their influence on how long a widow stays in power should be investigated.

A fifth factor, although it does not appear explicitly in our work, may be the widows's appetite for entrepreneurship and power, which she was barred from exercising as long as her husband ran the business. Further research is needed on this factor.

#### **How do Firms Taken Over by Widows Evolve? What Factors Condition or Influence this Contribution?**

Both our historical review and the case study provide tentative answers only, from non homogeneous sources, which should not be treated as statistically significant. We identified, from our sources, family businesses which developed and thrived significantly when widows took over, and which were successfully transmitted to the next generation. Previous involvement of the widow in the business, before her husband's death, the close involvement of her children and her ability to maintain family commitment to the business are key factors that need to be explored. Furthermore successful and unsuccessful businesses taken over by widows should be compared to test the validity of these factors and identify new ones.

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**Table 1: important dates in the evolution of French family law, as regards married women, since the French Revolution**

1791	Women are no longer excluded from succession rights.
1804	<p>The civil code establishes the legal incapacity of married women. They are forbidden from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- signing a contract, managing property,</li> <li>- working without the authorization of the husband,</li> <li>- directly and personally receiving a salary.</li> </ul> <p>The husband controls her mail and relationships.</p>
1907	Married women are given the right to full control over their salary.
1938	<p>Reform of matrimonial law:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The legal incapacity of women is suppressed.</li> <li>- In theory women may open a bank account. In practice this is another story.</li> </ul>
1942	The woman assists her husband in running the family.
1965	<p>Reform of matrimonial law:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Married women can have a professional activity without asking for their husband's consent.</li> <li>- Married women are entitled, should the case arise, to unemployment benefits.</li> </ul>
1982	The wives of self employed craftsmen or traders can chose between three statuses: spouse-contributor, employee or partner.
1985	Equality of spouses in running the family or bringing up the children.
2005	The spouse is obliged to choose a status as soon as he has an activity in his spouses business. This means mandatory enrollment in a social welfare and medical insurance programme. There are three statuses to chose from: spouse-contributor, employee or partner..